



Netwatch

By Jim Carroll

Your guide to business & accounting on the Internet

Backgrounds and backslashes

Many situations call for due diligence into an individual's background, such as hiring an employee, contracting the services of a professional or assessing a potential client. We've long turned to investigative or research firms to undertake such background checks —

and we'll likely continue to do so since they know how to get their hands on the pertinent paper-based corporate records and legal documents. And yet, we might need to run the occasional quick-and-dirty background check using the Internet. There are now some 2.1 billion pages to be found online in the major search engines, which means that even the most basic search can reveal absolutely fascinating information about your subject.

Perhaps the best example is the case of 54-year-old

Patrick Critton, who was arrested in September 2001 for hijacking an Air Canada flight to Cuba in 1971. On the run for almost 30 years, Critton was found after a Peel Region police officer did an Internet search of public databases and found someone with Critton's name and background living in New York state. In a matter of weeks,

he was identified by authorities and brought to justice.

When looking for information about an individual over the Internet, be sure to type the person's name in brackets or quotes (depending upon the search engine you are using) in order to restrict your search. Start out with a broad search, and then narrow it using city names, product or service names, or other details. (For example, searching for "Jim Carroll" and "futurist" might help you avoid citations for another Jim Carroll, such as the famed US poet and reformed heroin junkie.) When using search engine Google, do a quick check of the same name within Google Groups. This will look for your target within the many hundreds of millions of postings made to Internet newsgroups.

You can also take your search back in time by visiting the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, which can

provide information on what the individual or company he or she worked for may have been doing years ago. The site has preserved thousands of websites in their original format going back to 1996. Aside from being a great re-

search tool, it's also just darned fun to play with!

Of course, search engines such as Google don't cover all the information on the Internet. If you visit CompletePlanet and InvisibleWeb, you'll discover the world of the "hidden Web," as these services lead you to various searchable corporate directories and lists, who's who databases and other sites that might contain information about people. Also check out Cyndi's List for Genealogy Sites on the Internet and look within the Finding People category.

Don't forget to use the increasing number of public records that are becoming available online, particularly if you are looking for information on an American. Two sites worth checking out are the listing of publicly searchable databases at BRB Publications and PublicData. The latter allows you to search a vast number of US databases, including criminal records, driver's licence details or civil court and voter records, for a variety of states.

Last but not least, if you really want to conduct a detailed search, you might consider pay-per-use services such as PeopleSearch or PeopleFind.

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DUE DILIGENCE ONLINE

Wayback Machine www.archive.org

Cyndi's List www.cyndislist.com/finding.htm

BRB Publications

www.brbpub.com/pubrecsites.asp

PublicData www.publicdata.com

PeopleSearch www.peoplesearch.com

PeopleFind www.peoplefind.com